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## **Out of the ordinary: research participants' experiences of sharing the 'insignificant'**

### **Abstract**

How do research participants feel about having their 'ordinary' lives researched? This article focuses on how research participants manage the sharing of details emerging *out of* their ordinary lives in the context of research – an activity which, for most, is *outside of* the ordinary. Despite two significant research turns – towards reflexivity and towards the 'everyday' – these experiences remain curiously neglected. Drawing on a study of small acts of help and support, I seek to push methodological debate about researching the ordinary beyond the technical challenges of surfacing or capturing the apparently mundane or 'insignificant'. I do so by arguing that background feelings rooted in the living of, and sharing about, the ordinary are analytically important in their own right; that the 'ordinary' itself therefore has to be *managed* by research participants and researchers; and that Goffman's notion of performance is a useful tool for understanding how this is done.

### **Introduction**

There has been extensive recent engagement with reflexivity in research (May and Perry, 2017), including a focus on the role of emotions (Gray, 2008; Evans et al, 2017). At the same time, a re-engagement with the everyday has been very much in evidence across a range of topics within the social sciences (Hardy, 2017; Nordqvist, 2017; Pink et al., 2017). Indeed, as Riessman (2008) once said of narrative, the everyday is everywhere. Yet despite these two

significant turns, there is little reflexive engagement with the experience of having the most mundane aspects of our routine lives researched<sup>i</sup>. Recent research on digital performances of everyday lives reminds us that, even in an age of life streaming, the sharing of ordinary lives involves considerable performative work (Tiidenberg and Baym, 2017; Brownlie and Shaw, 2018). Yet, outside of the digital sphere, there has been little investigation of *how* ordinariness is managed in research encounters. There are passing references to participants' appreciation of being asked to take part in research on the everyday (Bennett, 2015) or, conversely, to their concerns that ordinary aspects of life do not merit research attention (Bartlett, 2012), but these feelings are not generally treated as having analytical import. Instead, the technical challenges of surfacing the mundane and apparently inconsequential in research are focused on (Wood, 2014; Pink et al., 2017)<sup>ii</sup>. As a result, we know little about what it *feels* like to be on the receiving end of these endeavours; for instance, to have one's kitchen work recorded for research (Wills et al., 2016), to go on a walking tour of one's house with a researcher (Pink and Leder Mackley, 2013) or, coming closer to home, for academics to have their ordinary research work observed (Greiffenhagen, Mair and Sharrock, 2015). Similarly, in the growing body of work on everyday morality outside the home (Flores, 2013), the experience of telling about ordinary 'moral work' is also missing. These are curious omissions, given the research turns noted, but they speak to the extent to which background, understated emotions – in research as elsewhere – tend to pass unnoticed (Barbalet, 1998). The aim of this article is to foreground the methodological implications of such emotions when researching the everyday. In other words, to understand how research participants' feelings about the 'insignificant' *and* attempts to research these might inform the design, ethics and analysis of such research.

While there has been little attention paid to this topic, work involving the Mass Observation archive is an interesting exception. Archive participants, or ‘respondents’ as they are known, are specifically encouraged to submit accounts that ‘reveal the detail of ordinary life as something socially and historically important’ (Shaw, 1998:4-5). As Kramer (2014) has carefully documented, the remit of writing about the ordinary ‘for posterity’ means that Mass Observation respondents *are* highly reflexive about the ‘ordinary’ they share (or decline to share). In most other research on the everyday or ordinary dimensions of life, however, it can be hard to convince participants that the ordinary has social significance. Yet, these participants too, have the potential to be reflexive about their sharing of the ordinary if we listen out as researchers for this and actively encourage them to share their experience of discussing ordinary life for research purposes. Not to do so is not simply discourteous but a missed analytical opportunity. Such reflections are potentially revealing of participants’ views about what research is for, and their understandings about the ordinary aspects of everyday life, but also of the particular substantive aspect of ‘the ordinary’ under investigation – in this case, small, often routine, acts of help and support.

Another exception to the general claim that ‘ordinariness’ has not been of methodological concern is to be found in the work of ethnomethodologists. Sacks (1985), most notably, argued that people tend to emphasise the ordinariness of events not because they *are* necessarily ordinary, but because they are ‘constantly preoccupied’ (1985:414) with being perceived as such. To go ‘outside’ being ordinary, Sacks argued, brings ‘unknown virtues and unknown costs’ – the latter including the risk of being thought ‘odd’ or ‘pretentious’ (1985: 418). Sacks’ research aimed to show how in everyday life we turn the dramatic into the

ordinary to avoid such risks. The focus in this article, however, is the opposite: how it feels to tell about the ordinary/mundane aspects of lives, rather than the dramatic, in the context of research – an activity which, in its concerted attention to the everyday, is ‘out of the ordinary’. This involves understanding ordinariness as no less performed in research encounters than the dramatic and allows for the possibility that sharing the ordinary can also carry emotional risks. In the following section, I explain the nature of these risks, how they are rooted in understandings of the everyday, and why Goffman’s work in particular offers an insightful framing of these.

### ***Feeling ordinary: making sense of research participants’ experiences***

Research participants’ feelings about taking part in research on the ordinary can be conceptualised in a number of ways. The terms – ordinary, everyday, insignificant and mundane – are often used, as they are in this article, interchangeably, to draw attention to aspects of life that are, to use another term, ‘unremarkable’ – that is, not typically deemed worthy of attention and/or comment. Though closely related, these terms are not, however, entirely conflatable. The ‘everyday’ relates to having an ordinary/mundane quality, *and* ‘every day’ to a daily occurrence, and while the latter temporal experience could be ordinary, it need not be (Metcalf and Game, 2004). Moreover, while, for some the everyday is thought of as having qualities related to the ordinary and routine, so that to understand it is to theorise the mundane (Scott, 2009), the everyday is also understood as not only the place and time of the insignificant but *also* where and when the significant takes root. The challenge of defining (and researching) the everyday is, in part, about this difficulty of separating off the everyday from the rest of life exactly because it is the basis of *all* activities (Lefebvre, 1991). This ambiguity about the parameters of the everyday and about its dual quality - its

ordinariness but also its fundamental character - explains why ambivalence has been at the heart of theorising about the everyday (Lukacs, 1971; Lefebvre, 1971). Such work, however, tends not to focus on the emotional consequences of these qualities of everyday life and, of particular interest here, nor has it addressed the implications these emotions have for *researching* the everyday.

So while a whole array of emotions present *in* everyday life has been researched (Highmore, 2011), emotions *about* the ordinary or banal dimensions of the everyday - such as boredom, trust and familiarity - are less explored, though there are important exceptions. Boredom, a 'mood' associated with the routine nature of the everyday (Ferguson, 2009), for instance, has recently been re-examined by Misztal (2016). Misztal presents boredom as a devalued emotion, experienced when 'the drama fails for some reason' (Darden and Mark, 1999: 26, cited in Misztal, 2016: 112). This failure might result from one having an absence of a role to perform, or of one's roles or scripts being perceived as poor quality or too familiar. While it is true that the everyday can be transformative (Neal and Murji, 2015), the roles and scripts research participants are asked to share in research about 'ordinary experiences' are often without explicit drama, and this has consequences for their subsequent research performance. As suggested earlier, studies of everyday life are peppered with passing references to participants' concerns that their lives might be perceived as boring or falling short of 'drama'. This is the case even when participants are given explicit instructions and permission to share 'ordinary' experiences. Kramer (2014), for instance, cites Sheridan's (1993: 36) point that Mass Observation participants complained about questions or 'directives' if they were seen to be too 'trivial', despite the Mass Observation's *raison d'être* *being* ordinary lives. Kramer

(2014) notes, too, that some of the critical responses to her Mass Observation directive on family history were framed in terms of it being ‘too boring’ and a participant in Pilcher et al.’s (2015) study of everyday lives chose not to photograph domestic chores – ‘the dross’ – to avoid boring others. Researchers, in their turn, worry that their research on the ordinary may be experienced as boring. Pink et al. (2017), for instance, were concerned that participants in their study of commuting cyclists might find traditional methods for recording their everyday practices ‘dull’. Affective risks of sharing the ordinary, then, include anxieties about boring others but also, as will be explored later, feelings of shame at having done so or, indeed, shame in relation to other aspects of the everyday.

Emotions *about* the mundane nature of the everyday have also been engaged with through the notion of familiarity. The ‘feeling-tone of familiarity’ (Ferguson, 2009:39) is that of trust and security – feelings which can be placed at risk when norms of everyday interaction are breached (Garfinkel, 1967; Goffman, 1959). Goffman recognises that the risks inherent in everyday interactions are ultimately emotional: ending up ‘slightly embarrassed’ is the most likely outcome of mundane exchanges, but being ‘deeply humiliated’ is not an impossibility (Goffman, 1959: 156). As such, he argues, we try to protect ourselves, often through working together as a ‘team’ and through practising tactfulness. This is true too of research interactions, though in the methodological literature it is frequently *researchers’* performances that are focused on, and often in dramatic research contexts (Drake and Harvey, 2014). Yet we know that research participants also face difficulties when telling about their ordinary lives. Pilcher et al. (2015), for instance, argued that while visual approaches allowed for the ‘backstage’ of the everyday to be seen, they also presented

challenges such as how to surface the habitual and how to manage distressing emotions, including grief, provoked by researching the everyday. In what follows I aim to push these methodological arguments about researching the ordinary further, first by suggesting that the complexities Pilcher et al (2015) identify in using visual methods to tell about the everyday may apply to other methods too and, as such, speak to broader tensions in how ordinariness is experienced and shared in research. Secondly, and relatedly, by arguing that the emotions we need to consider when researching ordinary everyday life are not just strong or disruptive ones, such as grief, but also less obvious ones, such as shame or trust, that are rooted in the living of, and sharing about, the ordinary. Finally, building on these two arguments, I suggest that the ‘ordinary’ itself has to be *managed* by research participants as much as researchers. In what follows, I explore this methodological argument through investigating participants’ experiences of taking part in the [...] project.

### **Researching the ordinary: the case of small kindnesses**

Part of a larger programme of research on risk, trust and relationships<sup>iii</sup>, the [...] project was concerned with what could be thought of as ‘small kindnesses’ (Gouldner, 1970). In other words, very low-profile instances of help and support - taking in a neighbour’s bin, lending an ear to a fellow commuter - that take place outside of the obligations of close family and household relationships. Carried out over two years in [city], and structured around three socioeconomically diverse areas, the project started with a conundrum: researching small acts of help and support, involves an awareness or *noticing* of the needs of others, and yet this noticing itself often receives scant attention, even from those directly involved. To address



this complexity, the project drew on a range of methods<sup>iv</sup>, but I focus here on only three: participant logs; face-to-face interviews (before and after the log-keeping) in which participants reflected, with researchers, on the content of these ‘documents of life’ (Plummer, 2001) *and* on their completion of them; and finally, telephone interviews, after the fieldwork was completed, which explored participants’ experience of taking part in the research.

[...] Participants were asked to log day-by-day over a week to 10 days, instances of low level help and support (given or received, offered, refused or withheld) which took place outside their close family or household relations. They were able to choose how to complete this log and instruction was offered on the various techniques, though, for ease of use, and resonating with the understated foci of the research, the equipment used was ‘low key’: paper notebook, digital recorder, camera, text messaging or some combination of these. Participants were also given considerable guidance about what they might wish to include in the logs; mirroring the language arising out of preliminary focus groups, they were encouraged to think about instances of ‘helping out’, ‘doing a favour’ and ‘lending a hand’.

In total, 44 core participants<sup>v</sup> recorded some 500 instances of help and support, with all but one having instances to record and most with entries for each day. Follow-up telephone calls were carried out with a subsample of these core participants.<sup>vi</sup> Overall 41 logs were completed: 34 written-only, one drawing-only, two written with drawings, two phone-text logs and two audio-logs<sup>vii</sup>. This diary-interview method is unremarkable and widely adopted (Zimmerman and Wieder, 1977) but because it requires participants to make decisions about what to share, and to then reflect on these choices, it is well suited to the methodological concerns of interest here. In particular, it helps to illuminate why sharing about the ordinary

in research involves more of an emotional gamble, and provokes greater ambivalence, than might be assumed by the apparently insignificant nature of what is shared.

As will become clear, however, the relationship between lives lived and lives told is a complex one. In what follows, there is no assumption that emotions can be straightforwardly retrieved from talk or text as they are constituted, like the ordinary itself (Seigworth and Gardiner, 2004: 143), through research interaction. Moreover, as in Pilcher et al.'s (2015) study of everyday lives, participants create their logs with an intended reader in mind: sometimes this was the researcher they had met, at other times, a faceless or 'backstage' research team. Participants often instructed researchers on how their texts should be read and while the aim of the follow up interviews was to encourage participant reflexivity (Spowart and Nairn, 2013), we tend, as Goffman notes, to conceal 'lonely labour' in everyday life so our performances can appear as 'finished products' (1959:53). This is no less pertinent, and in fact might be even more so, when the audience for the 'product' is an academic one. Ordinary life, moreover, is not monolithic but rather made up of numerous practices, and the potential distinctiveness of the substantive focus through which the ordinary is being explored needs to be kept in mind: feelings about the ordinary, in other words, play out in specific ways in relation to the substantive topic of help and support.

### **Performing the ordinary through research**

Bearing these points in mind, in the remainder of the article, I aim to illustrate empirically the intertwined argument outlined above: that the challenge of documenting ordinary acts and interactions is not just to do with the technical limits of particular methods, but with how participants feel about the 'stuff' of ordinary life and having it researched. These arguments

are explored through investigating participants' choices about log type, how logs constitute ordinary acts and interactions as significant, and how participants manage the performance of sharing their ordinary lives (including their ordinary moral work). Through this, feelings about insignificance are shown to be at the heart of participants' research performances.

### ***Ordinary methods*<sup>viii</sup>**

Resonating with others' findings on research participants' anxieties about being thought 'boring', a key concern across the [...] sample was whether ordinary aspects of everyday lives merited extraordinary (research) attention – in other words, whether these aspects were *significant* enough to justify this attention. Concern about significance surfaced in talk about choosing between particular kinds of logs, and also in discussion about the nature of the mundane and the routine. Despite the choice of tools available, most participants (34 out of 41) chose to document the everyday through the written-only log. Age did appear to influence their choice to the extent that those who opted to phone-text were aged 18 to 40, and some older participants explicitly reflected on generational influence in choosing the written log: 'I was brought up in the age in which you wrote things down' (Edith, 70s)<sup>ix</sup>.

However, across age groups and social class, participants also opted for what they saw as the *most* ordinary medium. Of course, no tool is intrinsically ordinary - one person's innovation (texting entries for instance) is another's everyday practice – yet participants described seeking out the medium that was most *routine* in the context of their everyday – which may also explain why it was participants in the younger age groups that chose to text: 'I text other people every day as well so it wasn't any different to that. [...] I always have my phone on me' (Danny, 20s); 'I [...] chose phone and writing because that's, that's to me real, like every, every day' (Subodh, 20s); 'I keep several diaries. I do lots of lists, and that's the way I

operate' (Paul, 60s); Conversely, then, other media such as audio-recorders and cameras were perceived by some as not part of the everyday, but, for example, as 'another thing to carry' (Sophie, 30s) or lose – 'I know it's insured but it's... you know' (Subodh, 20s).

Settling on an 'ordinary' technique, however, was not always straightforward. Some participants initially chose the camera, or intended to use the camera on their phone, but then reverted to the written log. This gap between initial intent and actual practice might speak to the wish to avoid appearing boring, by initially choosing the more 'creative' option, yet when asked about their decision to switch back to a written medium, participants returned to a reluctance to see what they were documenting as meriting special (visual) focus. Others have noted, in this journal and elsewhere, that visual approaches can be a way of avoiding the boredom of recording mundane life through more traditional methods (Pilcher et al, 2015: 681) but for some participants in the [...] study taking photographs felt like a breach of the quotidian: 'I didn't use the camera at all because the things I was doing were just normal everyday things' (Marion, 60s).

The analytical potential of visually capturing everyday lives is well established (Martin, 2014; Rose, 2014) but there is also a growing awareness of the pull of 'Kodak moments' (Guell and Ogilvie, 2015), as well as of the potential emotional and ethical costs of participatory visual methods, particularly when they are used to represent the relational (Muir and Mason, 2012). For some participants in the [ ] study, too, there were anxieties about how, in particular, to represent visually ordinary *relationships* of help and support.

'I think it would have stressed me out more, being like, "Oh, I need to think of some way of translating what's going on"' (Emily, 20s).

I couldn't really take a photo of me in action, helping someone, or anything. I mean I suppose I *could* o' done, but I just, I don't know. (Harry, 20s)

Such risks can be further accentuated when participants and researchers do not share the same understanding of what ordinary relationships are significant. For Adrian (40s), a single parent, choosing the camera 'would have just ended up a series of pictures with my wee boy in front of everything'. Here, Adrian is describing a 'would be' photograph (Guell and Ogilvie, 2015): one imagined but not actually taken, in this case because it did not align with the research focus on ordinary interactions *outside* of close family.

***Finding significance: how methods shape the ordinary***

Participants' expectations of what is significant and merits telling shape their choice of method, but the opposite is also the case: methods facilitate different performances of ordinary acts and relationships, and in doing so raise further challenges involved in documenting the ordinary. It is not news to suggest that log content can be read as both topic and resource (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004), but working out exactly how method shapes content about the ordinary dimensions of everyday life (including what ordinary relationships and acts of help and support are included) is complicated.

Adrian's anxieties about 'backtracking' below, for instance, are not just about the moral trouble of breaching others' ordinary lives – though his account of his father is a reminder of the multiple audiences he is having to manage - but are also about 'authenticity'. Participants who chose the written log appeared to have no difficulty retrospectively describing event(s) –

indeed writing encouraged retrospection as participants rarely carried the log around with them. Using a camera, however, was associated with spontaneity, with capturing the ordinary in ‘the moment’ (Isabella, 20s). Through explaining his log to the researcher, it becomes clear that Adrian experiences taking photographs after the fact as inauthentic.

I thought, well I'll take a picture of that, and I'll take a picture of that, and I'll match that up, and I didn't take it out, [...] and then after a couple of days that I hadn't done it, [...] I didn't want to go backtracking and go and take pictures of stuff that fell first or something. And then [...] I was telling my parents about what we're doing and my dad's like, ‘Oh you're not taking a picture of the house’, and I'm like, ‘No, I'm not doing the pictures, I've got a...’ and then I don't know, I just left it. (Adrian, 40s)

But anxieties about authenticity are again not specific to visual methods but are rooted in log keeping in a more general sense. There is a two-way relationship between log and life: we (researchers) read the log in relation to the life – for instance through questions about typicality (how typical are the two-week entries of the life as a whole?) – but participants also read their life, and relationships, *through their log*. Through becoming an audience to their own performance of ordinary life, a sense of a lack of fit between the log and life can emerge. Such disjunctures reveal how participants can be taken off guard by their *own* performance: ‘I was a bit surprised [by] how much I do do the family things so that made me feel quite good’ (James, 30s). Of course the opposite can also be the case: logs can reveal a lack of everyday social connection and be potentially provoking of shame, highlighting that there are ethical implications of encouraging others to ‘notice’ their everyday (Brownlie, 2014). The nuances of Goffman’s work on the layered nature of impression management help explain the multiple roles that research participants such as James occupy. These involve not just the

performance given to the researcher, but also how participants can become their own audience. Participants and researchers also engage in teamwork (Goffman, 1959) to manage performances about ordinary lives – a point returned to in the next section.

### ***Managing mundanity***

I have argued that participants' anxieties about choosing methods are linked to an unease about ordinary life meriting documentation. But I have also suggested that, even after methods are chosen, participants can still feel uneasy about how these shape what is considered significant. Of particular concern to participants is documenting the mundane and habitual as, in Bruner's terms (1991), the 'why tell function' of these stories is unclear. Participants reflected apologetically on how their logs amounted to the 'same thing, different day' (Liam, 50s), with some remarking on their struggle to log the 'really, really mundane' (Harry, 20s). Pilcher et al (2015) identify these challenges of surfacing 'the entrenched' in relation to visual methods, but the [...] data suggest again that these challenges are not method-specific.

I found that [written log] very hard to do because I don't have any sort of significant contact. I mean I just say 'good morning. How's your son? Is he better now?' that sort of thing and I found it really difficult to think about that as something you would record, something you would do. People speak to me at the bus stop. I speak to people who look as though they would like to speak and that kind of thing. And as the days go by, the pattern really doesn't change. [...] (Elizabeth, 70s, follow-up telephone interview)

How then did participants manage this sharing of the mundane? One way of dealing with the recurring dimensions of everyday life – the ‘could you pass me?’ (Harry, 20s) type of interactions – was for participants to decide to simply omit them from the logs. Discounted as ‘minor interactions that don't really...they're automatic’ (Sarah, 30s), participants reasoned these could be excluded on practical grounds - they ‘happen so regularly that [...] you’d have just been overwhelmed’ (Danny, 20s). For female participants in particular, these omissions often included background support: typically a gendered absence as it usually involves the type of emotional support done by women (Brownlie, 2014). In other words, the practices that make life liveable, and which would be *very* noticeable in their absence, get written out despite being significant.

At the end of the week I thought, I haven't put down any of my sort of usual phone calls to and from family because they go on all the time. (Claudia, 60s)

In thinking about the mundane and repetitive, participants again are caught between performing for different kinds of audience (Goffman, 1959), including the researcher and themselves.

I found [it] strange to be writing down [...] when it's just things you do and you're kind of saying, ‘well I just do that anyway so is that what I should be noting’? And of course I looked at the notes [research information] and ‘yes that's what it's about’ so, you know, just pulling myself back. (Beth, 50s)

Uncertainty about what to include is clearly not here about lack of guidance – as noted earlier, this was extensive and Beth herself makes reference to it – but instead is about participants’ perceptions of what doing the research properly involves, and needing to convince themselves that ‘what it’s about’ justifies documentation. Indeed, participants were



often apologetic in the second interview, suggesting they were ultimately unconvinced by their own performance: 'I was disappointed there wasn't more going on' (Suzie, 50s); 'I was just sorry I didn't have more to offer you' (Marguerite, 70s). Paradoxically, the research interview itself can, as Hall, Lashua and Coffey (2008) remarked, add to a sense of ordinary life being 'suspended' or, as in this case, creating the feeling of lack, of what is on offer being 'not good enough'. Thinking reflexively about the specific project design for the [...] study it is possible, too, that the effort involved in keeping a log added to this sense of expectation, fuelling participant anxieties about lack. The coordination between performer (participant) and audience (researcher) required to successfully achieve a shared understanding of what is going on in research – what Goffman (1959) refers to as 'teamwork' - can come under stress when the focus is the very ordinary. The following interaction illustrates what is emotionally at stake at such moments and is illustrative of anxieties about lack.

Frances: And I know what you're gonna say to these people [research team] when you're having a wee chat and you're all together, 'I'm sorry about this but this lady has got the most boring, awful life'.

Interviewer: I'm so not going to say that at all.

Frances: [...] And now how could that be interesting to anybody?

Interviewer: But for us, that's what our whole project's about.

Frances: And interesting people?

Interviewer: It's about people's stories, people's everyday lives; that's what the project's about, that's what they're interested in.

Frances: I can't see it, darling. (Frances, 80s)

In Goffman's terms, Frances discloses to the researcher the impression she believes she is giving. Like the Shetland shop clerk who declares to his customers that he cannot understand how they can drink what he is selling (Goffman, 1959:209), Frances cannot believe the researcher wants to hear what she is telling. The researcher tries to redefine Frances's account as being of interest to the research. Perhaps reading this as tactfulness, Frances, in turn, resists and in doing so questions how the researcher will behave once she is 'back stage' (Goffman, 1959), 'all together' with the rest of the research team. Goffman saw tact and teamwork as involving the avoidance of 'inopportune intrusions' (1959: 204) into the 'back stages' of others but Frances's concern here is that such tact may not stretch to the researcher's backstage. In her follow-up telephone interview, indicating the extent to which she found this troubling, Frances continues to challenge the researcher's 'definition of the situation': 'Can you tell me honestly? What could you possibly find interesting in what we said?'.

Some of this concern, about being thought 'boring', might be made sense of through the project design, or through the disorientating effect of research making strange the familiar, (Neal and Walters, 2006) and possibly the classed nature of researcher and researched relationships (Skeggs, 2004). But its emergence across the [...] sample and also, as noted earlier, in other studies, suggests that something important about the experience of telling about the ordinary is being touched upon here. Like other participants, Frances attempts to manage her feelings of unease by offering instructions on how her log should be read.

Addressing the problem of lives being treated episodically (Raffel, 2013:166), Frances makes clear that the account she is offering is her life as a widow in her eighties - 'please don't

expect more’ - but also that her apparently ‘boring’ life has a history: ‘please understand, [I was] married for 60 years’. Pilcher et al. (2015) highlight similar justification work in relation to the photographs their participants choose to take. The above suggests such work is not method-specific but present in research on the ordinary more generally.

Another way of managing anxiety about insignificance and having entries that are ‘very samey’ (Harry, 20s) is for participants to choose to log what ‘mattered’ within the constraints of the ordinary. Others, though, through the act of recording, might come to think of the ordinary as significant. While this sense of creating intensified ordinary moments has been associated with visual methods (Chaplin, 2004 cited in Pilcher, 2015: 683) the point is again a broader one. The participant below, for instance, is describing a written log.

I suppose the things that happened in those days [...] in the grand scheme of things [...], they're not significant but they're significant to the extent that I thought ‘I'll write them down’. (Kevin, 30s)

For some participants, however, ordinary acts and interactions are not transformed in this way and so they ultimately refuse the researcher’s definition of the situation that ordinary interactions do merit attention.

John: Because the rest of it is not interesting.

I: Okay.

John: It wouldn't be interesting to you either.

I: So can I get a sense of the kind of things you didn't put in there, which you didn't think that we'd find interesting? The things you kept out.

John: I can't, I can't really tell you that because if I'd have thought it was interesting then I would have put it down.

(John, 70s)

Schütz (1967) made clear how crucial agreement about the taken-for-granted world is to our sense of security and that, as such, a 'special motive' is needed to disrupt our 'attitude to daily life'. As is the case with John and Frances, some participants resist the idea that research can provide such a motive. It is not surprising, then, that the sharing of the ordinary can be anxiety-provoking or constitutive of other emotions such as shame – an emotion argued to be produced by even the slightest threat to the social bond (Scheff, 2000). The question of how research, focused on ordinary acts and interactions involving help and support, accentuated such feelings is explored in the final section.

### ***Performing everyday moralities***

Resonating with research that suggests helping is part of a finely-tuned socioemotional economy (Clark 1997; Flores, 2013), participants in the [...] study thought carefully about their accounts, with a primary concern being to avoid being seen as dependent: 'is this going to make me look like a kind of taker?' (Joanne, 40s) (see Brownlie and Spandler, 2018 for a fuller account of the fear of being seen as dependent). This may well explain why participants' logs mostly included acts of giving rather than receiving. Concerns about insignificance, however, also shape these moral tellings. The moral equivalent of pursuing

the Kodak moments mentioned earlier, for instance, leads to participants' concerns about the overinclusion of some interactions and relationships – in Sacks' terms, the equivalent of 'doing the kissing in order to have something to tell' (1985:417). Alan (70s), for instance, worries that if he carries his log around he might become 'more popular than Jesus Christ'. Though, as Fraser's account of how he adapted his log in response to his audience of peers makes clear, such virtuous narratives can themselves become morally dubious as the disclosing of kind acts elevates the teller from the anonymised 'ordinary' collective.

Fraser: At first, I felt like I had something to write down every couple of hours, and then I thought, 'No. Maybe, maybe just wait till the end of the day, and then choose *one*, coz that's a bit much', and my friends were teasing me a bit with the whole '#blessed'!

I: Blessed?

Fraser: Have you heard about that?

I: No. I haven't.

Fraser: It's like when someone puts a social media post up basically just bragging about how fantastic their life is [...] #blessed! So I thought I should maybe curb this.  
(Fraser, 30s)

The presentation of a moral self in relation to ordinary acts of help and support is, therefore, complex: involving both a reluctance to report 'doing kindness' such as in Fraser's account *and* to position oneself as being on the receiving end of it, as expressed by Joanne. Everyday moral 'failures', or the 'holding back' that means ordinary help does not happen, are also

mentioned infrequently in the logs. One instance of this is Mathew's account of a failed attempt to connect in passing with a neighbour whom he knew to be going through a difficult time.

Something I was thinking about which isn't recorded in the log, because it was nothing really happened. [...] I was intending to talk to her, really just to demonstrate that it was ok between us [...]. But I missed the chance because by the time I'd sort of stopped talking [...] she'd disappeared [...] and I mean in some way it's a slightly pointless story about something that didn't happen. (Mathew, 80s)

Resonating with Goffman's (1967:91) insight that 'empty gestures' are potentially 'the fullest things of all', in this account, a would-be interaction that failed to be remarked upon in the log is positioned by Mathew in interview as a way of showing his neighbour that her changed status has not affected their relationship. Mathew's ambivalence about his ordinary moral work— a sense of its insignificance *and* importance — can be heard in his instruction to the researcher to read this encounter as only 'slightly' irrelevant. Ordinary lives are multifaceted, and everyday moralities are a part of the landscape of most people's day to day lives. The above analysis suggests that, while there are sensitivities around sharing details about everyday moral encounters, [...] participants' concerns about whether ordinary acts and interactions warrant attention are very similar to the concerns implicit in the studies noted at the outset of the article which have a range of different substantive foci.

## **Conclusion**

The research ‘turns’ towards the everyday and reflexivity, noted at the outset of this article, have ensured that as researchers we now pay greater attention to the ‘complexity of the mundane’ (Phoenix and Brannen, 2014). Through exploring *how* and *what* participants choose to share, or not share, in their accounts of very ordinary acts and interactions of help and support and exploring what is it like for research participants to take part in the [...] study, I have sought to widen methodological debates about the complexity of the ordinary beyond the technical challenges of ‘noticing the unnoticed’ to engage with participants’ broader concerns about significance. These concerns may be accentuated by particular methods and topics, including everyday moralities, but they cannot be reduced to them.

The methodological implications of shifting attention onto participants’ feelings *about* the ‘insignificant’, and attempts to research it, include considering how best to encourage participants to tell about apparently mundane and unremarkable aspects of their lives, the consequences for them of doing so and how both shape subsequent tellings. If participants find it ‘demeaning’ to talk about their ‘boring’ lives (Bartlett, 2012:1724), and researchers worry that their methods are boring participants, then this is more than a technical trouble. It is a trouble about the nature of the ordinary - a trouble which speaks to why participants like Frances may feel shame about the mundane and question whether they can trust researchers with their everyday lives. The lack of attention we pay to such ambivalence increases the risk that their trust might indeed be misplaced. Social scientists have won the argument that tales from ‘the residue’ are valuable (Goodwin and O’Connor, 2013) and, while there may be many positives for people in talking about the ordinary aspects of their lives to researchers, this analysis suggests that such sharing may carry costs other than being bored.

At the very least, we need to question the implicit assumption that because the focus of research is ordinary, it will be routine for participants and allow instead for the possibility that emergent tensions and ambivalences might inform research on the ordinary. One implication of this might be to cast a critical eye on approaches that do depend on participants reporting on their ordinary lives. Pink et al. (2017), for instance, suggest that, however innovative, such approaches involve participants disclosing ‘mundane moments they would not usually share because it would be unnecessary or boring to do so’. Instead, they argue that methods such as video enactments and go-pro cameras, allow us to ‘accompany participants in to sites of their mundane’. Others too have made a compelling case for being ‘alongside’ participants (Latimer, 2013). There is no doubt that such approaches are hugely valuable, and yet we might still wish to pause before turning away from participants’ own reporting of ordinary life. Not just because some ordinary acts - including small acts of kindness that happen in passing in unexpected moments - are too contingent and fleeting to be easily observed or ‘enacted’ for researchers, but also because if we lose participants’ ‘voicing of the mundane’ (Greg, 2004) we also risk losing important insights into our ambivalence about the ordinary.

Despite what we are told is a universal turn towards the documentation of self, being *asked* to document our mundane lives produces emotions which are themselves revealing of the ordinariness of these lives. As such, we need to be open not only to new methods of entering the mundane but also to hearing more about how participants’ *experience* our methods, whatever form they take. There have been calls for the social sciences to produce research about the everyday that is recognisable to those who live it (Back, 2015). Thinking more about how to explain research interest in the apparently insignificant to those we ask to take



part in our research, and treating seriously participants' *feelings* about sharing what they may see as the boring, dull, and ordinary might be a good place to begin to answer this call.

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- i A special journal edition on the everyday (Sociology, 2015), offered a rich engagement with the subject; all but two of the articles described qualitative research on the everyday, yet none explored research participants' experiences of having their everyday lives explored.
  - ii This is also the focus of many of the articles in (i).
  - iii Funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (JRF).
  - iv Including 6 focus groups (one naturally occurring and one structured through household recruitment in each of the areas).
  - v These were recruited through a variety of approaches, including household screening and networking to achieve maximum diversity based on gender, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic class and disability. The use of logs with such a diverse sample, rather than a particular group (Bartlett and Milligan, 2015) is unusual and allowed non group-specific responses to be identified. Overall, the sample was approximately balanced in gender terms and was spread across the following age categories: 18-29; 30-39; 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70-79, and 80-89.
  - vi These twelve interviews were not carried out by the researcher who did the face-to-face interviews and were sampled to reflect the diversity of the wider group.
  - vii Three participants did not complete the log: two due to ill health and one because they lost the camera
  - viii This discussion could be read as concerning different techniques to deliver one method – log keeping - as visual logs can be thought of as a distinct method, however, reference is made to both techniques and methods.
  - ix Pseudonyms are used throughout the article.